Growing a Community Gardening Program

By Sameera Luthman

Virtually anyone who has ever planted a seed and watched it grow and develop into a beautiful flower or delicious food can attest to the tremendous sense of satisfaction that gardening can bring. Since the 1970s, the Naperville Park District has offered its Community Garden Plots program to provide a place for people to exercise their love for growing plants and food. And, through this program, something else has emerged and grown – a whole community with a passion for sharing its abundance.

Originally located on the property adjacent to Naperville’s Springbrook Golf Course, the plots were moved in the early 1980s to the more centrally-located West Street, just outside of the heart of downtown. This 13.5-acre property is owned by the City of Naperville and leased by the Park District. A total of 527 plots are available for rent.
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Although Naperville’s Community Garden Plots always have enjoyed a following of gardeners who rent and tend a plot—sometimes the same one year after year—in 2008, the Garden Plots experienced resurgence directly attributable to the declining economy. In a survey of Garden Plots renters conducted at the end of 2008, “source of food” was the primary reason that they participated in the program. This increased interest in community gardening also provided an opportunity for the Park District to expand the choices available to gardeners based on their suggestions. Improvements made in recent years include:

- The availability of half-size plots since not everyone wants or needs a large plot
- The addition of organic-only plots (43 full-size; 2 half-size)
- Seven raised ADA plots added to provide for wheelchair access
- Additional water spigots to provide gardeners with closer and easier access to the water source
- A partnership with the University of Illinois Extension office to provide a demonstration garden as well as master gardeners to assist other gardeners on site

Naperville Park District board member and master gardener Ron Ory is pleased to see gardening coming back into popularity, particularly at the Park District’s Garden Plots.

“The Community Garden Plots is well-named because community is such an important part of this program,” Ory explained. Ory began gardening in the late 80s following his retirement, and he pursued an Associate’s Degree in horticulture.

“It’s fun and rewarding to help other gardeners. Part of that pleasure comes from passing along knowledge and teaching someone else how to garden. That’s really where the community aspect comes in.” Ory also is proud to see a new generation learning about gardening.

In 2012, the Park District created its Green Thumbs program for preschoolers. Students in the preschool program started the garden before summer break. Then, the children in the Green Thumbs summer camp took over and began to enjoy some of the harvest. Finally, the preschool students starting the new school year in the fall completed the harvest and closed the plot for the season.

“The Green Thumbs program was very successful in its first year,” explained Brad Wilson, director of recreation. “Kids like to dig in the mud and most love the outdoors, so what better way to teach them a skill like taking care of a garden while they’re having fun? We look forward to continuing to offer this program and helping create tomorrow’s gardeners.”
Perhaps one of the best loved aspects of Naperville's Garden Plots program is the fact that it's something that can be experienced and enjoyed by people of all ages. With 507 of the 527 plots rented in 2012, it was estimated that more than 1,000 individuals participated in gardening in some way during the season.

"Gardening is a family affair," explained Wilson. "Parents, kids and even grandparents are out there any day of the week tending to their plots and enjoying the experience with one another. Gardening is a very social activity."

The Garden Plots also are like a neighborhood, and there's good and bad that can come with that.

"The gardeners get to know one another over the course of a season or after several years of tending the same plot," said Wilson. "Most of the time it's fine, but there are times when the 'neighbors' don't necessarily get along. Sometimes we need to step in and help settle disputes about maintenance, encroachment and other issues."

One of the ways that the Park District has made improvements to settling some of these neighborly issues is through their volunteer program, which has grown tremendously in the last few years. It also has become a great asset to the Garden Plots program. In 2011, the Garden Plots Ambassadors program was created using volunteers who were passionate about gardening. These volunteer gardeners monitor the condition of the plots, answer gardeners' questions and work with District staff to resolve maintenance issues.

"We're always looking for new and better ways to do things and creatively use our volunteers," explained Lynnette Hoole, volunteer coordinator. "In 2012 we created the 'Weed Mob' — a group of gardeners that go through the plots and help the gardeners weed. The idea is that these volunteers will assist in keeping the maintenance under control for gardeners who need help. Hopefully that will lead to fewer abandoned plots while minimizing issues between gardeners."

Volunteers help once the gardening season gets underway, but the District's Parks Department is an integral part of the process, getting the plots ready in the pre-season and closing them down following the harvest. In early spring, the plots are disked through a contract with a nearby farmer. Then, the Parks staff takes over tilling the plots and marking and staking the individual plots. Throughout the season, the staff mows the aisles and the spaces around the gardens. They also mow over approximately 8% of plots each season that have been abandoned by renters.

"Garden plot abandonment isn't a huge problem," Wilson explained, "but it's still an issue that needs to be resolved on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes the gardener has things that come up in their personal life, and they just can't stay on top of their gardening maintenance. Other times, the job is just too big for them to do."

Another important aspect of Naperville's Community Garden Plots is the way it helps give back to the community. Several years ago, a food donation kiosk was added onsite where gardeners can donate extra produce to benefit the individuals and families who use the services of local food pantry Loaves & Fishes. Donations have increased significantly over the past few years, and in 2012, gardeners donated more than two tons of food, which had a positive effect on the food pantry.
"We appreciate the partnership of the Naperville Park District, and we are immensely grateful to the wonderful gardeners," explained Jody Bender, community relations director of Loaves & Fishes. "Their dedication in ensuring Loaves & Fishes receives this food speaks to their true community spirit. We emphasize access to fresh, nutritious foods, so these donations of fruits and vegetables help our families live healthier lives."

Further enhancements to the Garden Plots program are planned in the coming years, integrating more involvement of the University of Illinois Extension.

"The plan is to continue to develop learning centers with more demonstration gardens to give people the tools to tend to their own yards and gardens," Ory explained. Future demonstration gardens could include shade gardens and tree and shrub gardens.

"If I were to sum up the benefits that the Community Garden Plots provide the community, it comes down to economy, ecology, environment, beauty and the satisfaction of doing it yourself."

About the author
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Thinking about starting a garden plots program?
Although providing space for community gardening might sound rather simple, there are several issues that need to be considered. Once the challenges are understood, your agency can establish processes and guidelines to manage the program effectively:

- Develop a registration process.
- Implement a communications plan aimed at keeping gardeners informed nearly all year long.
- Monitor the status of the garden plots throughout the season.
- Plan for and make staff available to maintain the perimeter of the plots throughout the season.
- Determine the guidelines and expectations for plot maintenance and communicate these to the gardeners. Likewise, be prepared to manage abandoned plots.
- Understand that garden plots most likely will never make money. Adopt a philosophy that they are provided as a community service, and any associated revenues will not offset all program costs.

Naperville Park District's Community Garden Plots By the numbers:

- Full-sized plots are 19'x30', and half-sized plots are 19'x15'
- Total number of garden plots: 527 comprised of 462 full-size and 58 half-size and 7 ADA plots
- Total number of organic plots: 43 full-size and 2 half-size
- Over 500 plots are rented each year
- Approximately 93% of renters are Naperville residents

Rescue 911 — An Emergency Mutual Aid Plan
When a storm raged through Reed-Keppler Park last summer, Jesse Felix, Superintendent of Parks for the West Chicago Park District, had an emergency plan in place. But the execution of his plan required additional manpower and equipment to deal with the aftermath of the powerful storm — more than 160 trees uprooted or snapped in half. Find out how multiple agencies came together to secure the area, clear away the debris and save as many trees as possible.

Would your agency participate in a Regional Natural Disaster Plan if one was implemented in your area? Visit our website to read more about the West Chicago Park District's response to the storm and their plan for coordinating regional and statewide disaster plans.

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